CULTURE, A KEY DRIVER OF FOOD INSECURITY IN KENYA: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Griphase Vande Masinde, Felicity June Kuri,
Assistant Lecturer, Assistant Lecturer,
Egerton University, Kenya, Egerton University, Kenya,
E-mail: masindeg5@gmail.com E-mail: june.kuri@gmail.com


ABSTRACT

Gender concerns remain among the top list of factors that affect agricultural productivity, thereby contributing to food insecurity across regions. While both women and men contribute to agricultural production and food security, women’s high productivity and low visibility are among the key concerns. Women’s contribution to global agricultural production for food and profit continues to be largely unacknowledged and undervalued. Their ability to farm is constrained because the resources they need are often controlled by others, mostly men. This paper argues that women in many different contexts continue to have their rights denied including independent control of land, agricultural inputs, credit and other essential resources. Their access to training, education, extension services and gaining leadership of rural organizations are impeded by assumptions on the part of national governments, community leaders and development policy makers in favor of men. Cultural practices and traditional norms which place restrictions have made progress for women even more difficult. They subdue women’s potential in agricultural production, impacting negatively on household and even community food security. The paper draws on primary data, supplemented by secondary sources. The paper concludes that cultural factors are a great hindrance to gender equality in agricultural production and perpetuate food insecurity where they are strong. They are exploitative and retrogressive, making women dependent on men even in areas where they have the potential to fight food insecurity and contribute to the overall wellbeing of their families, communities and society at large.

Key Words: Culture, Food Insecurity, Gender, Key Drivers.
INTRODUCTION

The question of food security has become quite critical in society because the success of all development initiatives depends on how well people are fed. It is obvious that the good health of individuals, families, communities and societies depends on the quality and quantity of food at their disposal. In the 1970s when food security issues were first highlighted, the focus was on national food adequacy to meet the aggregate requirements of its people. Thus, the attention was mainly paid to fluctuations in the macro-level food supply. However, this was found to be a very limited view of the food security problem. For instance, it was noted that a large segment of a population could be suffering from hunger even if the country had sufficient stocks of food during normal times. In other words, adequacy at the macro-level does not necessarily ensure adequacy at the community, household/family or individual level (IFAD, 2007).

Today, discussions on food security have shifted from the macro-level to the household, with more attention being paid to its differential impacts on gender. Gender concerns remain among the top list of factors that affect agricultural productivity, thereby contributing to food insecurity across regions. They cannot therefore be ignored when talking about agriculture and food security. It is obvious that both women and men contribute to agricultural production and food security. However, women’s high productivity and low visibility are among the key concerns. Women’s contribution to global agricultural production for food and profit continues to be largely unacknowledged and undervalued. Their ability to farm is constrained because the resources they need are often controlled by others, mostly men (Oniang’o et al, 1999).

Oniang’o further posits that women in many different contexts continue to have their rights denied, including independent control of land, agricultural inputs, credit and other essential resources. Their access to training, education, extension services and gaining leadership of rural organizations are impeded by assumptions on the part of national governments, community leaders and development policy-makers in favor of men. Cultural practices and traditional norms have made progress for women even more difficult, despite their desire to break out of it.

CONCEPTUAL DEFINITIONS

For a better understanding of this paper the following key terms and concepts are defined:

Culture - James and Garrick (1991) define culture as the way of life of a people. It includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, traditions and customs, law, values and any other capabilities and habits within a given society. Culture is thus the sum total of knowledge, attitudes and habitual behavior patterns shared and transmitted by members of a particular society.

On the other hand, Light, Jnr and Keller (1979) look at culture as a set of rules for behaving in a human way. These rules consist of all the customs, beliefs, values, knowledge and skills that guide a peoples’ behavior along shared paths. They argue that although it is the glue that keeps a
people together, it is flexible, and within limits, human beings can change their traditional patterns of behavior.

**Food Security** - A situation in which an individual or household/family has access to adequate food needed for an active and healthy life at all times. Adequacy here is seen in terms of quality, quantity and cultural acceptability (United Nations). It is a multifaceted concept that encompasses a broad range of issues: population growth, control and mobility, resource distribution, consumption patterns, agricultural production, climate change, environmental degradation, socio-economic status, trade relations, land ownership, gender relations and access to health care among others.

Food security is premised on four key pillars: (a) Food Production, (b) Food Access, (c) Food Utilization, and (d) Sustainability/Stability.

Hulse (2007) on the other hand, defines food security as a state where all individuals, families, and communities enjoy consistent access to foods that, in quantity, quality and biochemical composition, provide hygienic, nutritional adequacy. He also notes that food security requires secure ownership of or access to food resources and income earning activities, including reserves and assets to offset risks, to ease shocks and meet all contingencies. This means all people having access to stocks and flows of food and cash sufficient to satisfy their basic nutritional needs.

**Note:** Food Insecurity is the reverse of food security.

**Gender** - Refers to the social relations between women and men, girls and boys, determined by the different social roles and responsibilities as ascribed by society. It is these differences in roles and responsibilities that give rise to the different needs for and use of resources between women and men. Gender roles are learned through socialization processes; they are not fixed but change over time. The concept of gender is not about women. It is about both men and women, and the relations between them.

The concept of gender is also different from that of sex. Sex is a biological phenomenon. It is about male and female and the functionality of their bodies in relation to procreation and nurturing. Unlike gender roles, sex roles do not change. They are fixed, specific and universal.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Impact of Culture on Gender in Agricultural production**

Food security is concerned primarily with access to nutritionally adequate food at the household level, and is a prerequisite for adequate dietary intake. In the 1970s, the theoretical debate regarding food security focused on food availability or supply. However, the recognition that some groups of people face food insecurity and famine conditions even where food is available has created an understanding that a household's ability to obtain food is determined by its "exchange entitlements". A household's food entitlements are derived from its own production, income generated in exchange for labour, the gathering of wild fruits, community support (claims), assets, transfers (remittances, inheritance) and migration among others. If these entitlements are eroded or collapse, then food insecurity sets in (FAO, n.d.).
Unfortunately, this has turned out to be the case as most rural development interventions have primarily focused on promoting efficiency in the agricultural sector, rather than promoting equity between men and women.

The high productivity and low visibility of women in agriculture has been a worldwide issue over several years. The main focus has been the impact on development of a failure to recognize the extent of women’s responsibilities and roles, and to support women (Oniang'o et al, 1999).

Many studies have drawn the attention of policy-makers to the enormous workload of women across the world, and contrasted this to women’s lack of control over the land and property they use in production, and their lack of a say in how the products of their work are used. Cross-cultural comparisons show that women’s role in production was and still is undervalued across the world, both in agriculture and other systems of production (The World Bank, 2007).

Further, it has been noted that women are still burdened with almost all the domestic work and child-rearing, and that this is linked to the lesser value ascribed to women’s work. In societies where agriculture is the major source of household livelihood, the modes of production are related to the division of labour within the household, and in particular the marriage and community or family norms. The implications of this are that economic and social development unavoidably entails disintegration of the division of labour among the two sexes, traditionally established in the community (ICRW, 2008).

Gender analysis also confirms the links between underlying power relations between the sexes define, and are defined by the gender division of labour. For example, norms of female submission and fidelity within marriage are both economic as well as social issues, which shape women’s participation in production.

Independent land rights, which could enable women to decide on the use of land and appropriate the proceeds from such land, are still a dream for women in many countries. This, despite their increasingly central role in agriculture. Women’s relationship with land in many countries, and particularly in Africa is determined by customs and marriage. This kind of relationship, normally embedded in “socio - cultural norms” restricts women’s time and labour, and deprives the women of any powers to make decisions (Kameri-Mbote, 1995).

Studies have also shown that women have a great deal of indigenous knowledge about farming, but in the absence of exposure to technical knowledge which could potentially be gained from agricultural extension services, they resort to traditional farming methods, which do not yield much. The major problem here is that agricultural extension services generally tend to favor men, since it is assumed that only men can be better farmers. Again, the extension workers, who are predominantly men, focus their attention on the fields, rather than homesteads, where they could interact with women farmers. However, home visits to women are also looked at as social impropriety and therefore not encouraged. These cultural perspectives have thus denied many women access to agricultural technical advice and hence equity in agricultural production.

In Kenya, where the economy is largely agricultural, 80% of the population lives in the rural areas and principally depends on small holder agriculture for their livelihood. Of this, approximately 70% of the active subsistence farming population is female (World Bank, 2007).
Despite this huge contribution in agriculture, women in Kenya face major cultural and legal constraints of access to, and control over land and agricultural technologies necessary to increase the efficiency of operations. The limited accessibility by women to extension education (due to their gender roles) despite their potential contribution to agriculture significantly reduces their opportunity for accessing and adopting agricultural technologies. The assumption (usually based on patriarchal thinking) here is that when men are targeted for extension education, they share this information with their wives and other members of the family. Unfortunately, this is not always the case (www.fao.org/docrep/...).

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Cultural restrictions on women have a negative impact on agricultural production as they subdue women’s potential in production in agriculture. For example, among some Luhya sub-tribes and among the Ameru, a woman is not allowed to initiate planting of traditional crops like millet, finger millet etc. at the onset of rains in the absence of the husband lest a bad omen befalls the family. Even if he is far away, the family has to wait for him. Imagine the extent of loss in terms of time and the quality of the harvest! Similarly, at the onset of the harvest, the husband must be around to initiate the exercise. These kind of cultural practices are retrogressive and hinder agricultural development, resulting in perpetual food insecurity (Personal Observations).

In the same vein, the position of widows is also very telling. And of particular concern are the customary practices of wife inheritance and ritual cleansing, particularly among some communities in Western Kenya. Wife inheritance, the long-term union of a widow and a male relative of her deceased husband, was originally designed as a form of social protection and to secure her access to land. Ritual cleansing occurs by way of a short-term or one-time sexual encounter with a man paid to have sex with the widow in order to “cleanse” her from evil spirits that are believed to contaminate her on the death of her husband. These practices take different forms in different clans, but the common thread is that a woman can neither stay in her home nor have access to land unless she is inherited or cleansed (Amanda et al, 2007).

**Sample these:**

“When my husband died, my in-laws took everything: farm equipment, livestock, household goods, and clothing. They insisted that I must be “cleansed” by having sex with a social outcast, a tradition common in the area. They paid a herdsman to have sex with me against my will, and without a condom. They later took over my farm land, forcing me out of my home. They rendered me and my children homeless. We sought refuge in a shack offered by a sympathizer. No longer able to afford school fees, my children dropped out of school. We became destitute because of an archaic culture!”

*Emmy Owuor, a widow* (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

“When the death of my husband, my father – in – law told me that he was taking the property (land) because I only gave birth to girls who could not inherit anything from the family! He gave my husband’s land to a step brother... I was chased away by my brother in-law like a dog. They said since I didn’t have boys, I had no claim to anything in the home. I went to stay in my parents’ home... All I could take were my few clothes”

*Akello, a widow*, (Human Rights Watch, 2003).
These practices are exploitative and retrogressive and deny women their property rights, personal freedom, besides carrying the risk of HIV/AIDS. This has a significant impact on the food security situation in the affected households (Personal observations; Amanda et al, 2007).

That certain cultural practices are a threat to food security is further corroborated by the results of a gender study (2010) carried out by the author and others across nine districts in Rift Valley and Eastern Regions of Kenya for the Ministry of Agriculture and the African Development Bank. The study found that even though the existing cultural practices and myths in the concerned communities take on different forms, their effect on women's agricultural productive roles is similar. For example, the Maasai culture does not allow women to speak in the presence of men, especially in public meetings without the permission of the men. They are also not allowed to mix with men in terms of sitting arrangements at such meetings, since they (women) are counted together with children. This expressly kills off any ideas/contributions women may have towards development, including issues of food security. It relegates them to domestic/reproductive roles and completely kills any motivation they may have had thus making them totally dependent on men.

Among the Marakwets of Northern Rift Valley, women are not allowed to, for example, handle irrigation water at the storage points for use or even jump over irrigation canals, lest the water dries up due to the anger of the gods. This means that women cannot do irrigated farming in the absence of men! Women are also not allowed to venture into farms of certain crops during their menstruation periods lest all the crops dry up! Implication- food insecurity, poverty… and the list goes on.

**CONCLUSION**

Cultural practices and traditional norms have made progress for women quite difficult, although they would like to break out of it. They continue to face economic, socio-cultural and legal barriers that constrain their capacity to participate in decisions that hinge on farming and natural resources management, a situation that affects their ability to generate enough incomes that would go towards improving the standard of living of their households.

Although the Kenya Constitution (2010) provides for equal opportunities in access to and control over productive resources between women and men, traditions and customs still prevail. This has created a regime where men are treated as the naturally dominant lot. Women are reduced to powerlessness, economic marginalization, social vulnerability, and cultural inferiority.

The fact that women are the majority in small holder agricultural production, though many of them do not own the land, means that they have great potential and can boost food security and economic growth if given the opportunity.

Men and women can work together for the good of all. An important entry point is the systematic community gender awareness creation/sensitization to challenge men’s perceptions and attitudes (usually culturally inclined) about women’s roles and capabilities in the development process. Although this may take a long time to change due to deep rooted cultural beliefs and practices across many communities in Kenya, sustained strategic actions are the only way out.
Capacity building, including exposure of both women and men to good practices as well as formation of cohesive income generating mixed and women only groups are integral to success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Our sincere gratitude goes to Wilfred K. Subbo, PhD, Institute of Anthropology, Gender and African Studies, University of Nairobi and Damaris S. Parsitau, PhD, Director of the Institute of Women, Gender and Development Studies, Egerton University for their valuable input in this article.

REFERENCES


